

LITTLE BLUESTEM

Schizachyrium scoparium

(Michx.) Nash

plant symbol = SCSC

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Materials Center



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Uses

Pasture/range/hayland: Little bluestem is a fair forage species and is readily grazed by livestock, deer, and elk. It is also suitable for hay.

Erosion control: Because of its growth habit and adaptability to a wide range of soil conditions, little bluestem is useful as a component of revegetation mixes. It is especially well-suited for use on thin upland range sites.

Wildlife: Little bluestem seed is eaten by songbirds and upland gamebirds. The plant provides cover for ground birds and small mammals.

Landscaping: With its blue-green leaves during the growing season and attractive rusty color with white

fluffy seedheads in the fall, little bluestem is useful in ornamental plantings.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

Little bluestem is a medium height grass with coarse stems and basal leaves. As a warm season grass it begins growth in late spring and continues through the hot summer period until the first killing frost. It is easily mistaken for common broomsedge. Little bluestem has very flat bluish basal shoots. Plants are green, but often purplish at base of stem and the entire plant has a reddish cast after frost. Leaves are smooth, but frequently are covered with hair at the base next to the sheath. Leaves tend to fold with maturity. Seed head clusters about three inches long. The cluster stems are hairy. Plant height varies from 18 inches on droughty sites to 3 feet on deep, fertile soils. There are 255,000 seeds per pound.

Broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*) has a straight awn and has two or more stalked seed clusters per branch. Little bluestem has a twisted, bent awn and a single cluster of seeds per branch. Seacoast bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium* var. *littorale*) occurs only in the coastal plain region. It is very similar to little bluestem but can be distinguished by the bent stems at the base, whereas little bluestem stems are erect.

Adaptation and Distribution

Little bluestem is one of the most widely distributed native grasses in North America. It will grow on a wide variety of soils but is very well adapted to well-drained, medium to dry, infertile soils. The plant has excellent drought and fair shade tolerance, and fair to poor flood tolerance. It grows preferentially on sites with pH 7.0 and slightly higher.

Little bluestem is distributed throughout the United States. For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

Establishment

Little bluestem should be seeded as early in the spring as possible. Where no-till is used due to slope, stoniness, or other reasons, sod control should be performed in the fall to permit early spring planting.

The seeding rate for establishing a pure stand with broadcast or no-till methods should be 7 to 12 pounds PLS per acre. When drills are used to plant, debarbed seed must be utilized unless the drill has a chaffy seed box. When the seed is broadcast, a packer should be utilized to firm the seedbed and incorporate the seed 1/4 to 1/2 inch (3/4 inch on very droughty sites). No nitrogen fertilizer should be applied during the establishment year unless no weed competition is expected. If pH is below 5.5, lime is recommended during site preparation or the fall prior to no-till plantings.

For critical area seeding, the preferred method of planting is drilling, but if this is not possible, an acceptable alternative method is broadcasting the seed (typically in a mix with other warm season grasses) and 'tracking' it in with a bulldozer. The dozer moves up and down slope, off-setting each pass until the entire area is covered with tracks. Seedings should be made as early as possible in the spring on sands and gravels, without mulching. Moderate levels of N, P, and K are sufficient for establishment, and soil pH should be 5.5 to 6.0. Cultipacker-type planters are not suitable for this species.

Management

Control of competition is necessary for successful stand establishment. High mowing (above the bluestem seedlings) is a common method of weed control. Once established, poor stands can be rehabilitated by using proper management practices, such as controlled grazing, application of recommended rates of herbicides and fertilizer, and prescribed spring burning, where permitted.

Do not graze a forage planting during the year of establishment. During subsequent growing seasons, harvesting by controlled grazing or haying is possible on good stands. Do not remove more than 50% of the current year's growth from plants. No cropping should occur below 8 inches or within 1 month of anticipated frosts. Grazing of competing cool season grasses after frost in the fall and before the little bluestem is 1 inch tall in the spring is desirable.

Pests and Potential Problems

There are no serious pests of little bluestem.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

'Aldous' (Kansas), 'Camper' (Nebraska, Kansas), 'Cimmaron' (Kansas, Oklahoma), 'Pastura' (New Mexico) and 'Blaze' (Nebraska, Kansas) are cultivars that have been developed. There are also local ecotypes of little bluestem available from seed companies.

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <http://plants.usda.gov> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>.

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